

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in the CIVIC SUITE, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 13 January 2011.

- PRESENT: Councillor J D Ablewhite – Chairman.
- Councillors J T Bell, E R Butler, Mrs J A Dew, S Greenall, N J Guyatt, M F Shellens and D M Tysoe.
- Mr R Hall and Mrs H Roberts.
- APOLOGY An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor G S E Thorpe.
- IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, P G Mitchell, Mrs D C Reynolds, T V Rogers, and J S Watt.

69. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 9th December 2011 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

70. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No interests were declared.

71. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000 - FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered and noted the current Forward Plan of key decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) which had been prepared by the Leader of the Council for the period 1st January to 30th April 2011. Members were advised that the Budget and MTP, together with the Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators would be submitted to the Panel as a matter of course in February 2011. The Panel had already requested sight of the Asset Management Plan – Annual Report prior to its consideration by the Cabinet.

72. CUSTOMER SERVICES

(Councillor T V Rogers, Executive Councillor for Finance and Customer Services was in attendance for this item).

(Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, P G Mitchell, J S Watt were also in attendance as Ward Councillors for Yaxley and Farcet and Stilton).

The Chairman invited Mrs A Rees to present a petition containing 1,865 signatures objecting to proposals to close the Library and

Community Information Shop in Yaxley. The Petition had been prepared on behalf of Yaxley Parish Council and residents of Yaxley, Stilton, Farcet, Folksworth and surrounding villages and had been referred to the Panel from the Council meeting on 15th December 2010. A paper prepared by Mrs Rees in support of the Petition was circulated at the meeting (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

As part of her presentation, Mrs Rees outlined the need for a community centre in the area, particularly in view of the area's distance from the District Council's main facilities. She drew attention to a recent incident when assistance provided at the facility had prevented a case of homelessness from arising and emphasised the use of the centre by the Constabulary, Age Concern and elderly residents within the area. Whilst she acknowledged that the District Council was facing significant budgetary pressures, she also indicated that the community would support the retention of the facility including the possibility of joint service provision through the library.

The Chairman then invited Mrs J Barber, Head of Customer Services and Ms M Greet, the Council's Customer Services Manager to outline the proposed changes in customer services. By way of introduction, the Head of Customer Services reminded the Panel that all Heads of Service had been asked to identify potential budgetary savings as part of the process for setting the Budget for 2011/12 and Medium Term Plan for the period 2012-16. The proposals for customer services had already been considered by the Social Well-Being Panel at their meeting earlier in the month.

The Head of Customer Services drew attention to costs associated with customer services, the most significant of which related to expenditure on staffing and premises. She explained that the Council currently operated five face to face facilities within the District, which compared to the two provided by South Cambridgeshire District Council, one of which was offered in partnership with the County Council. Members were advised that as part of the evaluation process, an exercise had been undertaken to identify the types of enquiries which were received at the different facilities and, as a result, the changes in St Neots had been scaled back.

Members' attention was drawn to the differences in the profile of customers who used facilities at Ramsey and Yaxley in comparison with St Neots and St Ives. The Head of Customer Services stated that whilst the lease on the premises remained, services provided by partners would continue at the centres. She also explained that discussions were ongoing with Peterborough City Council to provide a facility for the scanning and emailing of housing benefit documentation on behalf of the District Council from the City Centre's office. Members were advised that consideration had been given to the use of the leisure centres and other options to provide some of the existing services, however, these would not deliver the required level deliver the required level of savings.

The Council's Customer Services Manager outlined in detail the specific proposals for service changes within Customer Services. Members' attention was drawn to the current level of services used at each of the five Customer Service Centres, the proposals for

alternative methods of service provision, the likelihood that savings of £100,000 would be achieved per annum and the impact of the changes on District Council customers.

In discussing the content of the presentation, a Member commented that the Council proposals should seek to provide the best quality of service to customers as cost effectively as possible. Another Member suggested that it would be useful to devise a matrix to demonstrate the impact of the proposed service changes on customers with a view to achieving the required savings with the least possible impact. It was also suggested that Members should have been presented with a number of specific options for consideration before a decision was taken.

With regard to the proposals for Yaxley, comment was made that the current service had been successful and was of benefit to the local community. Members drew attention to the poor level of public transport in the area and they reiterated that the community centre provided a front line service within an area that needed it. It was also suggested that a number of residents in the area would prefer not to discuss problems over the telephone. In addition, disappointment was expressed in relation to the proposal to operate a scan and email service through Peterborough City Council as local residents paid their Council tax to Huntingdonshire District Council. Attention was drawn to the community services which were provided by the centre.

Whilst there was general acceptance of the need to reduce the cost of service provision and support for joint service provision through the libraries to save money on premises, it was reported that the future level of library provision was not yet known. It was suggested that the library service would welcome the additional footfall and would have available public access computers. Concessionary fares would be transferring to the County Council. It was, however suggested that any decision on this matter should be deferred until the future of the Cambridgeshire library service was known. Moreover, a question was raised whether any consideration had been given to securing alternative premises from the private sector if the library option did not materialise. In response, Members were advised that discussions had taken place with the Yaxley Doctor's surgery.

During discussion on alternative methods of service provision, a suggestion was made that a member of staff might be released from the Huntingdon Customer Services Centre to visit customer service locations each week to deal with District Council matters. Comments were also made in relation to the potential for an increase in demand for advice services in the current economic climate and on the general preference for some degree of human contact. In response, Members were advised that surgeries would continue to operate at each of the centres until the leases' expired. Partner services / voluntary organisations would also be able to continue to use the premises. Having regard to the fact that the majority of enquiries in Yaxley related to benefits claims, Members acknowledged the intention to continue to provide benefits surgeries. However, concerns were expressed about the availability of this service in the longer term once the premises lease had expired.

In response to a suggestion that the Council should look for

opportunities for shared services, the Head of Customer Services explained that officers had spent a considerable amount of time doing this and either potential partners were unwilling to proceed or the joint service would be more costly. In addition, the Government were currently working with the Post Office to establish a mechanism for the verification of benefits forms by 2013 and until the national scheme had been introduced this could not be pursued.

Having noted the intention of the Head of Customer Services to give further consideration to the issues the Panel had raised and in recognition of the need to establish a long term solution to the provision of customer services, it was

RESOLVED

that the Executive Councillor for Finance and Customer Services be requested to take into account the Panel's comments on the long term delivery of customer services during the decision making process on the future of the service, including alternative methods of delivery, the possibility of using a roving officer funded from the existing Customer Service Centre budget and delivery through libraries, the post office and other mechanisms.

73. ONE LEISURE FINANCE

(Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Leisure and Law, Property and Governance was in attendance for consideration of this item).

The Panel welcomed Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds, Executive Councillor for Leisure, Mr T Parker, Director of Commerce and Technology and Mr B Moynan, Huntingdon Centre Manager who were in attendance to discuss the financial performance of the Council's Leisure Centres. To support their presentation, detailed financial information including an analysis of activities on a centre by centre basis and details of central support charges were circulated (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

By way of introduction, Mr B Moynan informed Members of One Leisures' financial situation including details of recent investment, the net outturn in recent years and the projected outturn for 2014/15. He then provided the net outturn on a centre by centre basis, together with income generated from admissions. Members were advised that substantial progress in increasing admissions and reducing the cost per head had been made at Huntingdon and more lately St Neots, however the absence of any major investment at Sawtry and Ramsey meant that these centres were not likely to make similar improvements. Attention was then drawn to the central support charges which totalled £1,268, 674 in 2010. Members commented on the level of these charges and the fact that the basis on which they had been compiled contained a level of subjectivity.

The Director of Commerce and Technology highlighted a number of issues relating to the operation of the five centres, which the centres would need to tackle in future months. These included staffing and pay levels. The cost of staff was highlighted as the biggest cost associated with running the service. In this regard and having noted that the leisure service had 230 Full Time Equivalent employees outside of Pathfinder House, the Panel were informed of a current proposal to change the remuneration scheme for variable hours staff. In addition, the Director of Commerce and Technology acknowledged that following the abolition of the Leisure Centre Management Committees, Member communications could be improved. The Panel's attention was also drawn to the particular socio-economic factors affecting the performance of the Sawtry and Ramsey facilities and the likely income from local schools.

In considering the information presented, a question was asked about the staffing levels at the Huntingdon centre. In response, Members were advised that the number of staff within the swimming pool was determined by Health and Safety requirements imposed by the Council. With regard to other issues highlighted within the presentation, comment was made that the cost of the creche facility was off setting the profits generated by the fitness suite and, therefore, a question was posed whether the facility should continue to be provided. Having noted that the cost of Badminton was now cheaper than in the 1990s, it was suggested that the pricing policy ought to be reviewed. Members were also informed that the St Ivo pool was the only swimming facility to generate a profit and that each centre had a different arrangement for allocating their energy charges and staffing costs.

Given the current economic conditions and rising fuel costs, the Panel queried how robust the energy and spending forecasts were within the report. In response and following a question on previous difficulties relating to irrecoverable VAT, the Director of Commerce and Technology explained that the Council had to comply with relevant legislation though facilities having Trust Status were treated differently, which might generate a small saving. Members requested that a draft business plan was drafted to assist them in a debate on the overall strategy for the service. A suggestion was also made that it would be useful for the budget to be presented in a similar way in 2012/13. In addition, the Executive Councillor for Leisure and Law, Property and Governance reported on the findings of research, which had established that when individual's disposable income was reduced, spending on leisure activities tended to be one of the last things they would forego.

Following further discussion on the level of management recharges allocated to the service, the Huntingdon Centre Manager re-iterated that without them the cost of the service was £0.8m. He explained that even if the Centres were to be put into Trust status, a level of management cost would still remain.

Having regard to the extent of the information provided and Members interest in giving further detailed consideration to the figures presented, it was **RESOLVED**

that Councillors J D Ablewhite, S Greenall, N J Guyatt and Mr R Hall be appointed to a working group together with representatives of the Social Well-Being Panel to review One Leisure's financial performance and make recommendations on the services' future strategic direction.

(Councillor Mrs J A Dew left the meeting at 9.00pm)

74. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF A14 UPGRADE

Pursuant to Minute No. 10/48, the Panel considered a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) providing information on the economic impact of the Government's decision not to proceed with plans to upgrade the A14. The report outlined a number of references to various sources of information on the subject produced by the Highways Agency and the East of England Development Agency. Attention was also drawn to a recent article in the Huntingdon News and Crier on the District Council's position and their intention to lobby for a cheaper version of the scheme.

Having noted the contents of the report, it was suggested that local Members of Parliament should be invited to discuss ways of lobbying the Government in support of the Council's position in place of schemes which remained within the Government's programme for improvements. Members also discussed the potential benefits of traffic management schemes.

Following a question about the viaduct at Huntingdon Rail Station, Members requested further information on its expected lifespan. Whereupon it was

RESOLVED

that the Local Members of Parliament for Huntingdon and North West, South and South East Cambridgeshire be invited to discuss an approach to lobbying the Government with a view to achieving the Council's aim of upgrading the A14 in a more cost effective way than previously planned.

75. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing progress of matters that had previously been discussed by the Panel.

76. WORK PLAN STUDIES REPORT

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute

Book) containing details of studies being undertaken by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

77. SCRUTINY

The Panel received and noted the latest edition of the Council's Decision Digest.

Chairman